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Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender

JUDITH LORBER*

Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water. Gender is so much the routine ground of everyday activities that questioning its taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions is like thinking about whether the sun will come up.¹ Gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced. Gender signs and signals are so ubiquitous that we usually fail to note them—unless they are missing or ambiguous. Then we are uncomfortable until we have successfully placed the other person in a gender status; otherwise, we feel socially dislocated. In our society, in addition to man and woman, the status can be *transvestite* (a person who dresses in opposite-gender clothes) and *transsexual* (a person who has had sex-change surgery). Transvestites and transsexuals construct their gender status by dressing, speaking, walking, gesturing in the ways prescribed for women or men—whichever they want to be taken for—and so does any “normal” person.

For the individual, gender construction starts with assignment to a sex category on the basis of what the genitalia look like at birth.² Then babies are dressed or adorned in a way that displays the category because parents don’t want to be constantly asked whether their baby is a girl or a boy. A sex category becomes a gender status through naming, dress, and the use of other gender markers. Once a child’s gender is evident, others treat those in one gender differently from those in the other, and the children respond to the different treatment by feeling different and behaving differently. As soon as they can talk, they start to refer to themselves as members of their gender. Sex doesn’t come into play again until puberty, but by that time, sexual feelings and desires and practices have been shaped by gendered norms and expectations. Adolescent boys and girls approach and avoid each other in an elaborately scripted and gendered mating dance. Parenting is gendered, with different expectations for mothers and for fathers, and people of different genders work at different kinds of jobs. The work adults do as mothers and fathers and as low-level workers and high-level bosses, shapes women’s and men’s life experiences, and these experiences produce different feelings, consciousness, relationships, skills—ways of being that we call feminine or masculine.³ All of these processes constitute the social construction of gender.

To explain why gendering is done from birth, constantly and by everyone, we have to look not only at the way individuals experience gender but at gender as a social institution. As a social institution, gender is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives. One way of choosing people for the different tasks of society is on the basics of their talents, motivations, and competence—their demonstrated achievements. The other way is on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity—ascribed membership in a category of people. Although societies vary in the extent to which they use one or the other of these ways of allocating people to work and to carry out other responsibilities, every society uses gender and age grades. The process of gendering and its outcome are legitimated by religion, law, science, and the society’s entire set of values.

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GENDER AS PROCESS, STRATIFICATION, AND STRUCTURE

As a social institution, gender is a process of creating distinguishable social statuses for the assignment of rights and responsibilities.

As a *process*, gender creates the social differences that define “woman” and “man.” Members of a social group neither make up gender as they go along nor exactly replicate in rote fashion what was done before. In almost every encounter, human beings produce gender, behaving in the ways they learned were appropriate for their gender status, or resisting or rebelling against these norms. Resistance and rebellion have altered gender norms, but so far they have rarely eroded the statuses.

Everyday gendered interactions build gender into the family, the work process, and other organizations and institutions, which in turn reinforce gender expectations for individuals.⁴ Because gender is a process, there is room not only for modification and variation by individuals and small groups but also for institutionalized change (J. W. Scott 1988, 7).

As part of a *stratification* system, gender ranks men above women of the same race and class. Women and men could be different but equal. In practice, the process of creating difference depends to a great extent on differential evaluation. From society’s point of view, one gender is usually the touchstone, the normal, the dominant, and the other is different, deviant, and subordinate.

In a gender-stratified society, what men do is usually valued more highly than what women do because men do it, even when their activities are very similar or the same. In different regions of southern India, for example, harvesting rice is men’s work, shared work, or women’s work: “Wherever a task is done by women it is considered easy, and where it is done by [men] it is considered difficult” (Mencher 1988, 104). A gathering and hunting society’s survival usually depends on the nuts, grubs, and small animals brought in by the women’s foraging trips, but when the men’s hunt is successful, it is the occasion for a celebration. Conversely, because they are the superior group, white men do not have to do the “dirty work,” such as housework; the most inferior group does it, usually poor women of color (Palmer 1989).

Societies vary in the extent of the inequality in social status of their women and men members, but where there is inequality, the status “woman” (and its attendant behavior and role allocations) is usually held in lesser esteem than the status “man.” Since gender is also intertwined with a society’s other constructed statuses of differential evaluation—race, religion, occupation, class, country of origin, and so on—men and women members of the favored groups command more power, more prestige, and more property than the members of the disfavored groups. Within many social groups, however, men are advantaged over women. The more economic resources, such as education and job opportunities, are available to a group, the more they tend to be monopolized by men. In poorer groups that have few resources (such as working-class African Americans in the United States), women and men are more nearly equal, and the women may even outstrip the men in education and occupational status (Almquist 1987).

As a *structure*, gender drives work in the home and in economic production, legitimates those in authority, and organizes sexuality and emotional life (Connell 1987, 91–142). As primary parents, women significantly influence children’s psychological development and emotional attachments, in the process reproducing gender. Emergent sexuality is shaped by heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and sadomasochistic patterns that are gendered—different for girls and boys, and for women and men—so that sexual statuses reflect gender statuses.

THE PARADOX OF HUMAN NATURE

To say that sex, sexuality, and gender are all socially constructed is not to minimize their social power. These categorical imperatives govern our lives in the most profound and pervasive ways, through the social experiences and social practices of what Dorothy Smith calls the “everyday/everynight world” (1990, 31–57). The paradox of human nature is that it is *always* a manifestation of cultural meanings, social relationships, and power politics; “not biology, but culture, becomes destiny” (J. Butler 1990, 8). Gendered people emerge not from physiology or sexual orientations but from the exigencies



Masculine, Feminine or Human?

ROBERT JENSEN

In a lecture on masculinity I ask my college students to imagine themselves as parents whose 12-year-old son asks, “Mommy/daddy, what does it mean to be a man?” The list they generate is not hard to predict: To be a man means being strong, responsible, loving, weathering tough times, providing for your family, and never giving up. I then ask the women to observe as the men answer the second question: “What do you say to each other about what it means to be a man in all-male spaces” (in the locker room, for instance)? Initially, there is nervous laughter and then fumbling from the men as they begin to offer a list that defines masculinity not in terms of what it is, but in terms of what it isn’t. In the vernacular: Don’t be a girl, a sissy, a fag. To be a man is not to be too much like a woman or to be gay. This list expands to other descriptions: To be a man is to be a player, someone who does not take shit from people, who can stand down another guy if challenged, who does not let anyone else get in his face.

One revelation from reflecting on the responses to these two questions is that the answers in response to the first question are not really distinctive traits of men, but rather traits of human beings that we value, what we want all people to be. The masculinity that men routinely impose on each other when they are alone is quite different. The locker room values are in fact dominant and toxic conceptions of masculinity that all men in the USA are exposed to.

It is obvious that there are differences in the male and female human body, most obviously in reproductive organs and hormones. Given our limited understanding of the implications of these differences, it is hard to draw conclusions about intelligence, morality, or emotionality associated with these biological gender differences, especially after thousands of years of patriarchy where men have defined themselves as superior. We would benefit from a critical inquiry of the categories of gender itself, no matter how uncomfortable they may be.

[edited, 2008]

Source: R. Jensen, “Masculine, Feminine or Human?,” in *Doing Gender Diversity*, ed. Rebecca F. Plante and Lis M. Maurer (New York: Westview Press, 2008).

of the social order, mostly from the need for a reliable division of the work of food production and the social (not physical) reproduction of new members. The moral imperatives of religion and cultural representations guard the boundary lines among genders and ensure that what is demanded, what is permitted, and what is tabooed for the people in each gender is well known and followed by most (C. Davies 1982). Political power, control of scarce resources, and, if necessary, violence uphold the gendered social order in the face of resistance and rebellion. Most people, however, voluntarily go along with their society’s prescriptions for those of

their gender status, because the norms and expectations get built into their sense of worth and identity as [the way we] think, the way we see and hear and speak, the way we fantas[ize], and the way we feel.

For humans, the social is the natural. Therefore, “in its feminist senses, gender cannot mean simply the cultural appropriation of biological sexual difference. Sexual difference is itself a fundamental—and scientifically contested—construction. Both ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are woven of multiple, asymmetrical strands of difference, charged with multifaceted dramatic narratives of domination and struggle” (Haraway 1990, 140). [1994]